TOWARDS THE REDEFINITION OF THE MEANING OF THE MEUSE VALLEY LANDSCAPE IN LIÈGE:

PROPOSAL FOR A LANDSCAPE EXPERIMENT.

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Key words: Meuse valley, Landscape architecture, Landscape laboratory

English Abstract

The localization of the city of Liège, in the Meuse (Maas) valley, later the development of its industries and its port, were all conditioned by the natural geography of its site. Yet today the site itself and its natural characteristics are seldom perceptible from within the city. The large scale destructions in the city fabric during the last two centuries broke up its historical site-responsive urban morphology. The disappearing industry left the landscape scarred with now meaningless traces, and no strong alternative vision for its future. While the region is waiting for "the" solution, for the definitive project that will give it new impulse and identity, the abandoned industrial sites and many of their surroundings are turning into "non-sites".
To gain a new vision specific to the valley, one must read todays' landscape as a palimpsest left by rural uses and urban developments, including industrial artifacts, overlaid on its original geomorphology. A "project" approach, such as that proposed by many landscape architects at different scales, from garden to forest and larger urban development, offers a way of observing and interpreting the landscape, eventually leading to iterative, local interventions, ("landscape acupuncture"). Inspired by the site-responsive agricultural past of the valley, the interventions should lead to a new spatial language of urban agriculture and forestry. Each of these interventions can turn into a "landscape laboratory", involving local stakeholders, whose aim is to articulate small scale landscape elements with long-term place and time-contextual investment, and thus redefine its identity.

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1. Introduction

The localization of the city in the Meuse (Maas) valley, later the development of its industries and its port, were all conditioned by the natural geography of its site. Yet today the site itself and its natural characteristics are seldom perceptible from within the city. The large scale destructions in the city fabric during the last two centuries broke up its historical site-responsive urban morphology[217]. The drastic transformations of the site itself during the 19th century (the diversion and canalization of the Meuse), the development of the infrastructures that cross the valley (railways in the 19th century, highways in the 20th century), make the site difficult to perceive and to read. Overall, while the city and a is located in a beautiful site – as is well shown on early engraving and in written descriptions – and the valley has a strong identity, the first impression of many visitors today is that of chaos and meaninglessness.
The Meuse valley is facing today the same predicament as the other industrial sites of Belgium, Northern France and the Ruhr valley in Germany (among others). The disappearing industry left the landscape scarred with now meaningless traces, and no strong alternative vision for its future. While the region is waiting for "the" solution, for the definitive project that will give it new impulse and identity, the abandoned industrial sites and many of their surroundings are turning into "non-sites".

To gain a new vision specific to the valley, a landscape approach is needed, that begins with a "landscape-literate" awareness of the site (Spirn, 1998). One must read and interpret todays' landscape as a palimpsest of signs left by rural uses and urban development, including its industrial artifacts, overlaid on its original geomorphology. A "landscape project" approach doesn't imply yet another "object" design, but proposes a way of observing and interpreting, eventually leading to iterative, local interventions, that can be thought of as points of "landscape acupuncture" (Occhiuto). Such approach has been proposed by several landscape architects, from a garden scale (G. Clément, L. Le Roy), to a forest (R. Gustavsson) and larger scale urban development (M. Desvignes, G. Vogt).
Inspired by the site-responsive agricultural past of the valley, the interventions should lead to a new spatial language of urban agriculture and forestry. Each of these interventions can turn into a "landscape laboratory", involving local stakeholders, whose aim is to articulate small scale landscape elements with long-term place and time-contextual investment. The "laboratory" process does not distinguish between management and design; it is necessarily open, responsive to the site-specific dynamics that it started and accompanies through time. As such, it is an instrument to teach "landscape literacy" and landscape-creating skills. Through interpretation and action, these laboratories can help build coherence (meaning) from the disjointed images carried by an apparently meaningless, chaotic territory, and thus redefine its identity.
The work presented here is the beginning of a post-doctoral research and summarizes the approach of Occhiuto and the research she has been doing at Liège in the past decade. It is based on the experience she gained from her long-term involvement with the derelict industrial

[217] Maps of Liège before industrialization and now clearly illustrate the extent of the transformations. See *Carnet des villes de Charleroi, Liège & Namur* (2006).

areas in the Meuse valley, through teaching and research, and on the methodology she developed of the "project as an awareness process for making landscapes" (Occhiuto, 2006, 2008, 2010).

2. Liège: general history and site specificity

Through the first thousand years of its history, Liège was the capital of an independent prince-bishopric. Acting as a buffer state in an often shifting international power equilibrium, its economy depended on the river, and on a network of roads connecting it to France to the West and Germany and the Netherlands to the East and North. More than on the natural conditions, it was dependant on the constantly moving borders and political alliances of the larger powers. The specificity of the political structure, where the various religious entities had a preponderant role up until the end of the 18th century, had a determining effect on the development of the land pattern.

Liège is located along the coal belt that extends from England, through Northern France and Wallonia, to the Ruhr Valley. While coal had always been mined in the area, its industrial extraction started during the second quarter of the 19th century, later followed by steel industry, it led the city to a long phase of development until the post-World War II era. An engineer's pride became an ingrained part of the city's self-image. The engineering feats culminated with the building of the Albert Canal and the canalization of the Meuse: besides protecting the city from flood, this allowed the river to serve as outlet and transport route for industry.

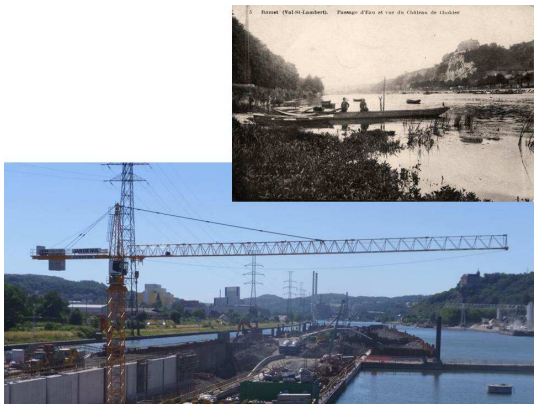

Fig. 1.The Meuse before (www.chokier.com) and after canalization (Ivoz-Ramet)

Fig. 2.The Meuse today (Ougrée).

After World War II, the story of Liège followed the same pattern as much of the coal belt of Europe: a fast overall decline, with only some small scale success stories here and there (Leboutte, 1997).
The story, told thus, is very generic. Yet in its detailed articulations, it is site-specific. The specificities of Liège can be found at the articulation of the general story with the specific local

conditions, showing how the actors of the overall trend had to adapt to and to accommodate the local geography and social conditions. Looking back at traces left by the past, not in its generic character, by in its detailed specificity, could give a direction to developing a vision for the city's future. Beyond today's buzzwords ("sustainable development" and the like), it is by looking in detail at the distinct characteristics of the site, from its geomorphological foundation to the way the leftover traces of the many different historical layers meet and spatially negotiate each other, that one can search for a future vision.

Figure 3. Inhabitants, factories, infrastructure: coexistence of unrelated urban fabric (Sclessin).

Figure 4. Road and rail along the river (Sclessin).

To understand the dynamics of the landscape of the valley, it helps to envision three typical moment of its evolution (figures 1.1 to 1.3). The schematic descriptions and sketches are intended as tools to look at the actual spaces with more acute eyes and notice those characteristic historical traces that are still visible today.

1. The overall structure of the valley in the pre-industrial stage (fig. 5) has probably not changed much over the centuries. There were a few villages in the valley bottom, often located when a cut through the hills allowed access to the upper plateaux; most of the land was owned by local aristocratic families and monasteries, that played an important political and economic role in the prince-bishopric until the end of the 18th century: there were also stand-alone buildings that were the local headquarters of these landowners, who owned much of the land around these building. The villages, and the road connecting them, were not located right on the river's edge, but at a slightly higher elevation, near the foot of the hills. According to early representation of Liège and its surrounding, the land was cultivated, even on the steepest slope that had some soil. Except in the floodplain itself, there were a variety of agricultural usages in squarish fields delimited by hedges, but also areas of more extensive agriculture, and in the wet areas, pasture. The edges of the river were not built into quays, except in the city centres; where the morphology of the river permitted, there were small ferries (rowing boats) and landings connected to the nearby settlements.

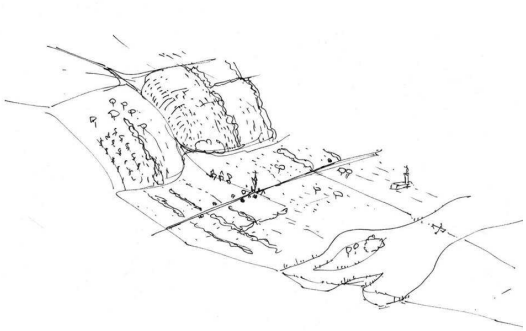

Fig. 5. The pre-industrial valley

2. Many of these land-use patterns remained during the first industrialization (fig. 6). Underground coal mines (mainly on the plateaux above) were excavated, generating slag heaps above ground, and disturbing the groundwater system below ground. Factories were often built on the site of the ancient aristocratic or monastic properties, bought by the new industrialist. Large track railroads were built to connect the towns along the valley, next to the road or at a slightly higher level, and local and private railroads, able to negotiate steeper hills, connecting the coal mines on the plateau to the factories along the river. Workers' housing was built near the factories, but also around the existing settlements, from where employees could reach the factory using the local train.

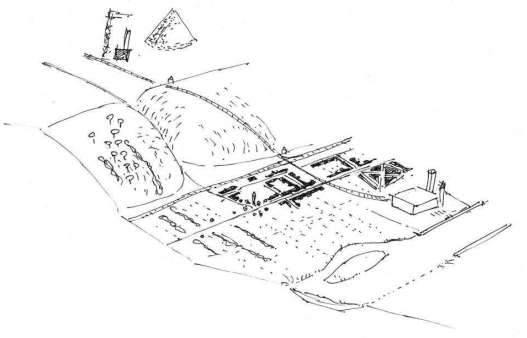

Fig. 6. First industrialization

3. The third stage (fig. 7) brought about a large-scale transformation of the valley. The whole river was rectified, canalized, dredged, and controlled by bridge-dams upstream and downstream. High-voltage lines criss-cross the valley. Built up areas in the valley floor, made of housing, commercial and secondary industrial developments, dramatically increased. New housing was also built on the slopes, and tall massive buildings on the plateaus, overwhelming the horizon line. Fast roads were built along the canal walls and across the valley; the design of these roads showed little concern about the existing landscape. Agriculture disappeared, taken over by buildings and infrastructure; too steep to be cultivated with industrial machinery, the slopes were covered with woodland, creating an almost continuous wooded rim on both sides of the

river. The slag heaps were abandoned; some are being used, and are slowly disappearing from the landscape; the remaining ones, covered with vegetation, are now protected habitat for biodiversity. Many of the small railways were also abandoned and have become more or less confidential green tracks, or bicycle roads.

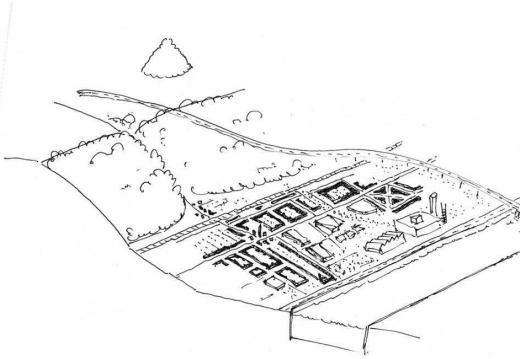

Fig. 7. The contemporary landscape.

Of course, no single specific place in the valley exactly follows this pattern of evolution. If we look at a specific area, such as the Cockerill factory in Seraing (fig. 8), a comparison of the historical maps (beginning with the very precise Ferraris map, drawn during the 1770) with today's map and aerial photographs, together with the understanding of the valley's evolution as it is reflected by the above sketches, one can begin to understand how they came into being

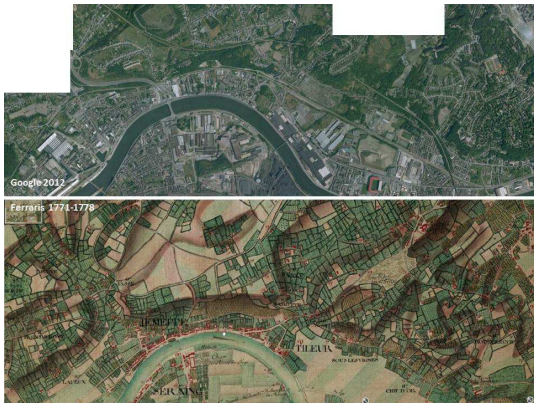

Fig. 8. The Meuse at Seraing. Bottom: Ferraris map, 1771-1778 (http://geoportail.wallonie.be). Top: Google Earth, 2012.

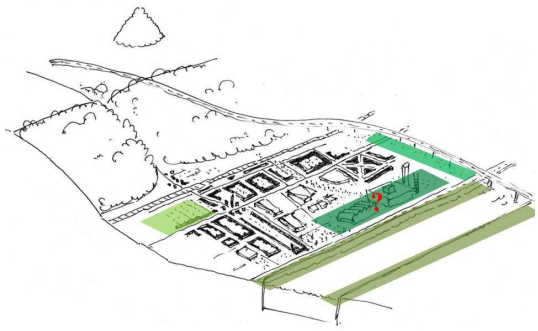

Fig. 9. Landscape layers

Each developmental stage created its own typology of spaces; subsequent evolution had to dialogue with these spaces, sometimes totally or partially erasing them, sometimes building around them, sometimes reusing them. Even as simplistic diagrammatic representation as the one presented above can allows one to look at the actual spaces with enhanced sensitivity, and

begin to ask more precise questions about its historical layering (fig. 9). Reading the landscape as a palimpsest means understanding the superposition and coexistence of these successive layers, and their continuing interaction (Occhiuto, 2008).

3. 'Landscape laboratories' for the Meuse valley

Asking more specific spatial questions regarding the existing spatial configurations is the first step in thinking to the re-creation of a coherent landscape at the scale of the valley. The issue, however, is not to redesign a complete and definitive landscape. Paraphrasing Desvigne (2009)[218], one can state that the aim is to recreate potential continuities in the landscape that can act as a skeleton; install landscape structures that can rapidly enhance the qualities of the site, but also create situations and opportunities for future urban development; imagine some sort of prototypes that can induce development. These precisely localized, small-scale "prototype" projects with large-scale implications, can be thought of as points "landscape acupuncture". Being a multiple-scale process, in both the spatial and temporal dimension, they offer an opportunity for in situ experimentations. They can be an opportunity to try out scenarios at short, medium and long term, and to observe and act upon the mutations these generated; they can offer the opportunity to explore interdisciplinary research methodologies based on "reflective practice[219]".

In March 2013, Occhiuto submitted a proposal to a University-wide program for urban greening, VERDIR, to set up a "landscape laboratory" within the Faculty of Architecture. Its aim is to build upon the research methodology just presented, in order to observe the evolution of the landscape, to then propose potential sites chosen in coherence with the natural condition and the historical evolution of the valley landscape, and to develop methodologies in urban agriculture or forestry for reweaving the sites to their large-scale and small-scale environment.

An inspiring example of the later is the "Landskapbslaboratorium", an experimental forest planted in 1994 on the Alnarp campus of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, near Malmö. As its name suggests, it is a laboratory for asking in parallel and in the long term a wide range of questions in different realms that quite often ignore each other: forestry, environmental protection and landscape architecture. Its inspiration are the rich formal (spatial) variety of traditional landscape management techniques, used in a new context and towards a new goal – here, the planning, design and management of multifunctional urban forests. The lessons it can teach are manifold: beyond the specific area of urban forestry, it can teach us about an open-ended, long-term design and management approach, and research methodology. The emphasis is on openness and potentialities, where design and management are combined into a common attitude called "creative management", and where future evolution is not imposed from the outset, but continuously and actively chosen. It is an attitude that highly values life-long human experience and people's implication in a common shared development, and as such, it is entirely in line with what is at stake in sustainable development (Gustavsson, 2008, 2009).

[218] All the citations from Desvigne (2009) are freely translated from the French edition.
[219] Schön (1984), cited by Occhiuto, 2008.

Many of the newer 'landscape laboratories', in Denmark (Holsterbro) or in Germany (Leipzig, Köln, Gelsenkirchen), were proposed as experimental forests[220]. However, the exemplariness of the Landscape Laboratory comes not only from the complexity and the quality of the forest spaces that are being created, but above all from the consistency between the principles it claims and the actual in situ realization. If we are looking for the large-scale coherence of our proposal in the geomorphological characteristics of the Meuse valley and the history of its landscape, other cultivated forms can be proposed as laboratories. Both urban forestry and urban agriculture (and maybe other forms of bringing vegetation into the city) can be called upon as appropriate forms of structured planting (Gustavsson and Ingelog, 1994). If we are to give sense to the disrupted and misused landscape of the valley, opening the possibility for a dialogue between the layers of the palimpsest and between the large scale reading of the landscape and small scale formal vocabulary of the agricultural uses may help us begin to think creatively about its possible evolution. The actual choice, however, will also depend on the commitment of those local stakeholders actively involved in the project.

4. Conclusion

The European Landscape Convention is quite ambitious in the roles it assigns to landscape. According to the Convention's preamble, landscape "has an important public interest role in the cultural, ecological, environmental and social fields; contributes to the formation of local cultures and is a basic component of the European natural and cultural heritage, contributes to human well-being and consolidation of the European identity; is an important part of the quality of life for people everywhere", and "is a key element of individual and social well-being". Therefore, "its protection, management and planning entails rights and responsibilities for everyone"[221].

The role of landscape architects is to be the facilitators for "protecting, managing and planning" the landscape. They bring a different vision, by finding beauty not only in exceptional landscapes, but in the everyday territories, insofar as these can welcome a diversity of uses and significations, and offer the possibility to creatively imagine a wide variety of ways of staging the transition between the fragmented pieces of the banalized technocratic landscape and help society to imagine other ways of occupying and composing the territory in order to build a common space (Desvigne, 2009).

The goal of the landscape laboratory proposed by Occhiuto is to experiment with new ways of being such facilitators. Through the proposed *in situ* 'landscape laboratories' it seeks to explore methodologies to build a shared awareness of "that quality that we call landscape" (Zagari, 2006) through its common making. By proposing different incremental strategies for transforming derelict industrial sites by management and design at several time and spatial scales, its ambition is to contribute to a new structuration of the landscape that can act as both a support and a lever for a new urban and territorial sustainability.

[220] In Holsterbro, the project evolved into a combination of forest and informal "self-organized" gardens. (Boris, 2012).
[221] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/heritage/Landscape/.

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